

Sunday, July 23, 2023

The Spirit Of Bondage

For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. (Romans 8:15)

Some of you may recall that I ended my last sermon like this: *“If you forget, neglect, misunderstand, etc., your union with Christ, you are going to have a warped view of the grace of God. And when you separate the gifts of God from God Himself (and from His presence in us), you are in danger. Two of the most common ways for things to go south is for a person to slip into legalism (works-righteousness, the spirit of bondage, [moralism]) or antinomianism (lawlessness, cheap grace). This can happen in a lot of ways, some of which are quite subtle.”* I would like to pick up where I left off.

These two concepts of legalism and antinomianism are typically looked at as opposites. On one extreme, legalism is “I can work my way to heaven through my obedience to God” and on the other extreme, antinomianism is “I don’t have to obey God at all because my sins are already paid for.” People often try to cure one extreme with the other extreme, but both are deadly errors. As I was working on this sermon, it occurred to me that these two things are just symptoms of a much bigger problem. They are two noxious weeds that grow out of the same corrupt soil, with roots going all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Fundamentally, they both come from any distortion of the law of God that results from you separating the law of God from God Himself, or that results from you forgetting that “Christ liveth in me,” or that results from a distorted view of the grace of God. The cure for these is not to move from one extreme to the other. The cure for both these errors is the same – the gospel of the grace of God in Christ.

Today, I’d like to focus on the “legalism” side of things. To avoid confusion, I’m defining “legalism” like this: Legalism is the false doctrine that you can earn or merit a right standing before God by your own works. Stated differently, it is the false doctrine that you, by your own works, can be justified in the sight of God. As Proverbs 20:6 says, “Most men will proclaim every one his own goodness.” It is an especially pernicious sin, because it embeds itself in the deepest nooks and crannies of our hearts, and we don’t even acknowledge it’s there. Nobody in this church is ever going to come right out and say, “I believe I can merit salvation by my good works.” But a spirit of legalism often lurks in the shadows and rears its hideous face in this or that situation, often without us even realizing that it’s happening. I would call this “practical legalism.” It is the condition where we know the truth at an

intellectual level, but it hasn't saturated our hearts yet. There is a disconnect between our heads and our hearts. In doctrine, we're not legalists, but in practice, we may be. We're all guilty of this, and I will confess up front that parts of this sermon feel autobiographical to me.

I can't possibly do an exhaustive sermon on this topic, so I think the best approach is to go through some sample scriptures and show some of the different faces that legalism can wear. Some of these faces are opposites. For example, "my good works are going to get me into heaven" (spiritual pride) vs. "my bad works are going to keep me out of heaven" (slavish fear). Both are legalistic ways of thinking because the focus is on your works instead of Christ's. His good works are imputed to you, and He already suffered the punishment for your bad works. Just remember that the underlying principle is that the grace of God is absolutely free and unmerited. You didn't do anything to earn it. You didn't pay for it. And on the flip side, you can't do anything to lose it. To look at it in any other way is to say that in the final analysis, your works determine your standing before God. (I'm speaking to the bride of Christ – what I'm saying here does not apply to an unbeliever). A legalistic heart finds it very hard to rest fully and find peace in the grace of God. Such a heart is very uneasy with the notion of grace. Such a heart is focused on its own works rather than on the work of Christ. Such a heart has an eye towards rules, activities and behaviors rather than an eye towards Christ.

We can learn a lot about this topic through the parables of Christ. The parable of the Pharisee and the publican is the classic parable on the matter of legalism, so I'd like to start with this one. In a few short words, Jesus gives us multiple symptoms of a legalistic heart. For many of us, "legalist" is synonymous with "Pharisee," the self-righteous hypocrites whom Jesus frequently rebuked. Often, when we get to the parts of the Bible about Pharisees, we quickly build up our own self-righteous head of steam and start applying their characteristics to other people – it's the same sanctimonious energy that you find in people who like to lob out "judge not!" without it ever crossing their mind that they ought to examine themselves first. It is the "me vs. those other people" attitude, and perversely, it's the very attitude of the Pharisees themselves. Of course, these things must be applied, but please apply them to yourself first. If you read what Jesus said to and about the Pharisees and your conscience is not convicted at least a little bit, then I'm afraid that your heart is deceiving you.

And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house

justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. (Luke 18:9-14)

In this parable, here are some of the symptoms of the legalist:

- They trust in themselves and their own perceived righteousness. It's not the righteousness of God they trust in; it's their own.
- They despise others. They have contempt for others. They look down on others. They "set at nought" others. And the reason is because they are unfamiliar with or neglect the grace of God and the righteousness of Christ. They think they have their own righteousness.
- They compare themselves to others. You see that the Pharisee thanks God that he's not like other people and concludes that he's better than they are. What he doesn't realize is that he is just like other people – he's a sinner just like they are. He might not be involved in the same specific sins that they are involved in, but he certainly has his own set of sins. You see that the publican is interested in his relation to God, where the Pharisee is interested in his relation to other men.
- They create their own standards and then congratulate themselves for living up to those standards. The standards involve self-sacrifice but are attainable with a little bit of effort. For example, there is no Biblical standard that requires a person to fast twice in the week and there is no Biblical standard that requires a person to tithe on "all that I possess," but that's what this man is resting on. He went above and beyond! The only problem is that he doesn't meet God's standards.
- They focus only on externals. Even while the publican is pouring out his heart to God in humility, the Pharisee is holding him in contempt. He has no idea what is going on in that publican's heart at that moment, but he certainly thinks he knows. The whole attitude is "thank God that I'm good and he's bad."

All these behaviors are based on the foundation that the legalist believes that he merits the favor of God, where other people don't. Anyone in this church would recoil at the thought that they would merit God's grace, but if any of this describes you, that's exactly what's going on in your heart. The legalistic temper has not been completely purged from your heart yet. Here are a few more sample passages regarding the Pharisees:

He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition. (Mark 7:6-9)

The legalist loves to come up with his own rules and regulations and standards and then hand them down as if they were given directly from the mouth of God. Pretty soon, these new standards will supersede what God actually did say. Making a person feel like they're going to hell because they don't live up to some standard that you've manufactured is a very evil thing to do.

The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. (Matthew 23:2-4)

The legalist rigorously lays impossible standards on others. Like it says in Acts 15:10, "Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" The spirit involved here is either "I'm going to tell you about all the standards that you need to keep, but I'm not going to lift one finger to actually help you" or "I'm going to hold you to high, oppressive standards, but I'm not going to keep those standards myself because I'm already righteous enough." Either way, this is the exact opposite of the liberty that we read about in the rest of the New Testament.

And when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them. But when they sought to lay hands on him, they feared the multitude, because they took him for a prophet. (Matthew 21:45-46)

The legalist shows himself to be uncorrectable and vengeful. What Jesus says to these people is 100% true, and they know it is 100% true, but their response is to stiffen their necks and start to look for revenge. It's very difficult for a legalistic heart to admit that it's wrong. Sometimes the Lord sends a person to expose one of your sins (it doesn't matter who – it could be someone in the church or someone outside of the church). You know that the person is right, but for whatever reason (maybe you don't like the person, or maybe you're so invested in the sin that it's hard to let go, or maybe you're embarrassed and want to save face, etc.), instead of going to God for mercy, you despise and attack the person.

Moving on to the next parable, the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is very familiar to most of us. For those who don't know, a man hires day laborers to work in his vineyard. Some start at the beginning of the day, some start at other times throughout the day, and some start at the 11th hour of the day. But all get paid the same. It's rather long, so here is how it ends:

...when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that

were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen. (Matthew 20:8-16)

There is a lot to mine from this parable, but the point I'd like to make today is that frequently, how you react when someone else receives grace speaks volumes about what is actually going on in your heart. It's easy to theorize about how you would react in this or that situation, but then when you're actually in the situation, you see how you would really react. The ones who started at the beginning of the day are showing a legalistic heart, and it was exposed simply because they found out how much those who started at the 11th hour were being paid. If they hadn't known, they would have been fine. Instead, a murmuring heart is exposed, filled with anger and envy. "It's not fair!" they cry. Well, grace is not "fair," so deal with it! Grace is unmerited. Again, the underlying problem is that they think that they deserve something because they've earned it. Any time you find envious anger, you will find a legalistic, entitled heart that has taken its eyes off the grace of Christ – whether that's regarding spiritual gifts that another person has, another person's station in life, another person's strengths, or any other grace of God. Might I also point out that the longer a person serves God, the greater the danger that they will fall into this trap. The ones who had served the longest in the vineyard were the ones who were the most angry and envious. You might wake up one day and say, "Look at all that I've done for the Lord; look at what I've accomplished. I've been serving God for 40 years, and now this Johnny-come-lately comes around. Who does he think he is? Where has he been while I've been putting my hand to the plow?"

The parable of the Prodigal Son is another familiar one and will be the last parable we'll look at today. Again, it's too long to quote the whole thing, but I would like to focus on the older brother and his reaction to the feast that is thrown upon the return of the prodigal.

...Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and

yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found. (Luke 15:25-32)

The legalist was right there in the Father's house, and nobody knew – in fact, that's the most likely place someone with this disposition is going to show up. He wasn't exposed until this display of grace towards his brother. Even in the face of an intreating father, you see that he is angry, and immediately starts to make a case based on his own works as compared to the evil works of his brother. (In the previous parable, the comparison was to the quantity of works; in this parable, it's to the good vs. evil quality of the works). He's delusional and displays a distinct lack of self-awareness when he says, "neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment." He's full of a contemptuous attitude, even referring to the prodigal as "thy son" instead of "my brother." He thinks he has merited a reward by his service over the course of many years (again, those who serve God the longest are in the greatest danger here). But apparently, the whole time he had been obeying out of obligation, not out of love, hoping to earn a reward. Also the whole time, the reward was right there, graciously given to him, not dependent on his works – "all that I have is thine." If you think of your heavenly Father as One who is an angry taskmaster, for whom you begrudgingly render obedience so you can earn a reward or avoid a punishment, you don't love God and you don't know God.

If you want to understand the topic of legalism, you should immerse yourself in the book of Galatians. Here are a few sample passages from that book:

I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed...Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified...Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?...For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith. And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them...Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record,

that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me...Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace...A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump. (Galatians 1:6-9; 2:16; 3:3, 10-12; 4:15; 5:1-4, 9)

The situation in Galatia was that some false teachers had entrenched themselves in the churches, teaching that the grace of Christ is not enough – you have to add your own works onto it. This is a serious matter, which brought an anathema from Paul onto anyone who would teach a lie like that. Paul’s message is, “if you think that you have to do some work to be justified in the sight of God, then you are now a debtor to the whole law of God, and you are therefore required to keep the whole law perfectly and suffer all of the curses and punishments of it when you have failed to do so. You have left the liberty that you had in Christ and have become entangled with the bondage of trying to earn your way to heaven.” A little bit of legalism infects you, and it infects everyone around you. It is especially insidious when it is taught as a doctrine. It’s not a minor matter. In the middle of Galatians, you’ll see Paul asking a heart-rending question, “where is then the blessedness that ye spake of?” A legalistic heart robs you of all blessedness and joy in Christ. You used to be so happy. You used to have such joy. You used to talk about the blessedness of God. What happened??? This spirit of bondage can show itself in so many ways. Here are a few examples:

- A one-track mind, where your spiritual thoughts are continually things like “I’m not good enough to serve God” or “I don’t feel worthy to serve God.” Newsflash: you are not, in fact, good enough or worthy. That’s the whole point of grace. It’s good to examine yourself but stop obsessing on how you feel about yourself and instead look at Christ.
- Fixation on “that one sin” that you just can’t seem to get passed. As if feeling remorseful enough about it will make things right with God. Or worse, as if Christ isn’t good enough to be able to cover that particular sin.
- A persistent general angst that God is mad at you so maybe you need to do more of this or less of that to fix that problem. Have you forgotten that “ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. (Romans 8:15)?” You are a child of God. You should be crying “Abba, Father!” Have you forgotten that “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. (1 John 4:18)?” You have lost your joy because you are cowering in slavish fear instead of rejoicing in the grace of God with a proper fear of God. You’re too focused on yourself

and your own works instead of God's grace. He will not break a bruised reed or quench smoking flax, so stop being suspicious of Him.

- Separating the law from the Lawgiver and looking at it as if it is an instruction manual of abstract "do's" and "don't's" rather than obeying God out of love. These commands which are not supposed to be "grievous" (1 John 5:3) suddenly become grievous and burdensome, and you are obeying only out of obligation or for show. You forget that the Lord gave the law "for our good always" (Deuteronomy 6:24). He didn't just give us a list of rules for behavior modification – He says, "My son, give me thine heart, and let thine eyes observe my ways." (Proverbs 23:26). There is a false gospel called "moralism" where you think God is looking for you to pick yourself up by the bootstraps, try harder, clean up your act, follow the rules, and be "a better version of you."
- Busyness. Sometimes you get so busy in serving God that you forget God! You're so engaged in the work that you forgot why you were engaged and who you were engaged for. And then you start getting angry at people because you don't think they're doing as much as you. I think of the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42 when Jesus said, "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her."
- If you're involved in a sin, instead of stopping the sin, you start piling on good works to counteract it. This can only bring misery and bondage.
- Or, when you fail, instead of first going to God for grace, you start coming up with action plans. "I need to do x, y, and z, and if I just try harder, I can fix this." With that way of thinking, you'll only exhaust yourself, and it will never be fixed.
- You see the moral law of God as something to do to get right with God, rather than something to do as a result of already being right with God. To say it another way: you look at the law as "do and live" instead of "you are alive, so do;" or alternatively, "do or you will die" instead of "you're redeemed from eternal death, so do." Don't forget about your union with Christ, beloved – never think of your good behavior apart from Christ living in you! "The just shall live by faith."

All these things are telltale signs of a spirit of legalism and bondage. Somewhere in your heart of hearts lurks a belief that YOUR actions or the intensity of YOUR feelings (e.g., love for God, grief for sin), etc., are what determine whether you're justified in the eyes of God. Instead, stop looking at your own works and start looking at the work of Christ. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1).

Other symptoms of the legalist are that he is ambitious and exclusionary.

...He asked them, What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way? But they held their peace: for by the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the

greatest. And he sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all. And he took a child, and set him in the midst of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them, Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me. And John answered him, saying, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbid him, because he followeth not us. But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part. For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward. And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea. (Mark 9:33-42)

In this passage, each one of the twelve really thinks that he is something. They are so far from humbly submitting to the grace of God that each believes that not only is he entitled to walk with Jesus, but that he, in fact, is superior to each of the others and merits to be considered the greatest. Add on top of that the way that they treated this man who was not part of their group simply “because he followeth not us.” The whole spirit of this reeks of superiority and suspicion. They look upon each other with contempt, and they look upon those outside of the group with contempt. This poor guy is casting out devils in the name of Christ, and it’s almost like they’re picking a fight with him. Why? The only reason given is “because he followeth not us.” Not “because he was promoting some false doctrine” or “because he was endorsing sin.” But “because he followeth not us.” I guess their reasoning is “he’s not with us, so he must be doing something wrong.” Maybe a little bit of territorialism, or jealousy, or competitiveness (like what was going on amongst themselves), or dismissive thoughts like “that guy over there is self-righteous; he’s trying to establish his own righteousness; if he was righteous, he’d be following with us.” Whatever their reasoning, there is one command in this passage, and it is, “Forbid him not...For he that is not against us is on our part.” This was probably a most unexpected answer from Christ. Remember that these are the twelve Apostles engaged in this behavior! (And this isn’t the only time. Peter fell into the trap of legalism and was rebuked by Paul – “I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed.” – Galatians 2:11). That is both terrifying and comforting. Terrifying because if they could fall into this sin, we’re certainly not immune from it and certainly have not been immune from it. Don’t presume and say, “God would never let that happen to us.” Comforting because the grace of God is displayed in all its glory here. They did fall into this sin, and they were saved from it.

The last point I’d like to make today is that the legalist thinks that other people don’t deserve the grace of God, so the grace of God should be withheld from them. Like there’s some kind of probationary period that a person has to go through to prepare themselves before they

would be suited to go to Christ. He wants to require that the sinner has already healed himself before he can go to the Great Physician for healing. He wants to require that the sinner make himself righteous before He receives the righteousness of Christ.

And Levi made him a great feast in his own house: and there was a great company of publicans and of others that sat down with them. But their scribes and Pharisees murmured against his disciples, saying, Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners? And Jesus answering said unto them, They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. (Luke 5:29-32)

The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners! (Luke 7:34)

The way you look at this has major implications. For a long time, I misunderstood this. I would say things that amounted to “First you have to clean your life up, and then I’ll tell you about Christ” or “First you have to feel a certain amount of remorse for your sins, and then you can go to God.” That’s subtle, and it might seem like hair-splitting, but there’s a big problem with that – it is adding conditions to the grace of God. It’s saying, “Christ isn’t good enough to save you in your current state – you have to go do this other thing first, and then you can go to Christ.” I think this way of thinking comes from a misunderstanding of repentance, where you think of it as something that you have to go off and do by your own effort, and once you’ve done that, then you’ll be prepared to go to Christ. It’s separating the gifts of God from God Himself, which I tried to show in my last sermon is always going to lead to problems. Remember that true repentance never appears without faith in Christ, and both faith and repentance are gracious gifts of God and are intimately tied to being in union with Christ. To be clear, every sinner, no matter how vile, has warrant to come to Christ immediately because God commands all men everywhere to repent and believe on the Lord Jesus. There is no preparatory work that they have to do first.

The most treacherous thing about a heart of legalism is that by its very nature, it wants to justify itself. If you’ve been listening to me and you are angry, or have put yourself into a defensive posture, or are excusing yourself (“Well, that describes me, but when I do it, there’s good reason”), or are otherwise zeroing in on your own works instead of the work of Christ, that alone ought to be cause for concern. “Thou art the man.” (2 Samuel 12:7). The solution, as I said before, is the gospel of the grace of God – “Christ liveth in me.” Don’t look at yourself apart from your union with Christ. Lord willing, next time, I hope to speak about legalism’s equally monstrous fraternal twin: antinomianism. “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?” (Romans 6:1-2)